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'Psychic warrior' in 'Men Who Stare at Goats' based on Hamburg man

By Michael Sragow
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The makers of "The Men Who Stare At Goats" have planted this epigraph before the movie: "More of this is true than you would believe." But I heard one young man emerging from a preview saying, "I don't think any of this is true."

Who in their right mind would buy a story about a visionary Army officer embracing Eastern martial arts and West Coast encounter sessions, then recruiting American fighting men who would "sense plant auras," "attain the power to pass through objects such as walls," "have out-of-body experiences," and "be able to hear and see other people's thoughts"?

And who could accept that this battalion employed psychic powers to locate a hostage halfway around the world — and to stop the heart of a goat?

But that visionary, Bill Django, played by Jeff Bridges, is based on a real man, Jim Channon, who did his military-intelligence training at Fort Holabird in Baltimore County (and lived at the Colony in Towson when he was doing it). In the 1970s and 1980s, he did engage commanding officers and fellow members of the think-tank Task Force Delta in his dream of transforming the military into a holistic band of brothers. They rewarded him by reading him official orders to become Commander of the First Earth Battalion.

Of course, this battalion (in the film, the New Earth Army) was a mind-expanding network, not a formal fighting group, with no set address except Task Force Delta and maybe Mother Earth. Its members were among the first on the planet to keep in touch through e-mail.

Many of the exploits that the filmmakers ascribe to Channon's troops were done just a few miles from Baltimore, at Fort Meade. The site was two crumbling barracks belonging to a Defense Intelligence Agency unit devoted to "remote viewing" — the term for envisioning an unseen target using extra-sensory perception. Dale Graff, a sometime Marylander who now lives in Hamburg, Berks County, directed the program and gave it an enduring name, "Stargate."

Channon's goal was to re-imagine the American soldier as a "warrior monk" — equally deft at war and peace, destruction and healing. Graff aimed to pursue untapped powers of perception while locating Cold War targets or drug smugglers through super intuitions.

On the phone from Hawaii, Channon says it's only "one third accurate." But he salutes the moviemakers because "it's really hard in the modern world of the trivia hairball to get anything important out to the public ... and they have made it so the paranormal doesn't seem like witchcraft."

OVERTURE FILMS

George Clooney (left) and Kevin Spacey star in 'The Men Who Stare At Goats,' a comedy-drama about the U.S. military's research into psychic warfare and espionage.

Channon and Graff appreciate the movie for continually pushing its audience to think outside the banker's box of the traditional military-industrial complex.

Graff may practice pre-cognition, but when he watched the film last week in Baltimore, he felt something else: "deja vu." Graff says the film gets several anecdotes dead right. The psychic who stops a hamster dead in its tracks — or, rather, stops it dead before it even hits the tracks of its rotating wheel?

"That was based on a Soviet test, but the Soviets staged the test with rabbits instead of hamsters." The use of remote viewing to rescue a U.S. general kidnapped by the Red Brigade in Italy? Joe McMoneagle, one of the Stargate psychics, won the Army's Legion of Merit "for providing information of critical value unobtainable from any other source on over 200 specific targets," including Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier, who was taken in Italy in December 1981, and rescued in 1982.

Some key scenes re-enact or echo several of Graff's pivotal experiences, but Graff objects to the film depicting American psychics recklessly ingesting LSD and even spiking eggs and water with the acid. "Our work could not involve 'non-ordinary consciousness,' meaning — no drugs! Those parts were silly."

Graff has continued to write books and lead seminars and workshops aimed at extending human instinct and perception. Channon lives "on an eco-homestead" and promotes a crusade dubbed "Operation Noble Steward," calling for a united global military to handle ecological problems.

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